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EU ASYLUM POLICY: RECEPTION CONDITIONS

FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

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A. INTRODUCTION: THE EU ASYLUM ACQUIS

The development of a system of reception for asylum seekers emerged from the development of a common European asylum system. ¹ Within the European Union as a whole, the numbers claiming protection, have increased in the last number of years, with almost 435,000 individuals claiming protection in the European Union in 2013.² From the establishment of an Ad Hoc Group on Immigration in 1986,³ to the obligation on states to discuss issues relating to asylum and immigration matters in the Maastricht Treaty,⁴ to the current situation⁵ where Parliament and the Council are

co-legislators on asylum matters. Over an almost 30 year period, issues relating to asylum have moved from the periphery to the centre of EU law and policy. Throughout this time, with some exceptions, there has been a constant reaffirmation of the legal values relating to the protection of those seeking asylum in the European Union from the European Commission. In its first stage, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) simply aimed to set down minimum standards. However, in the last few years the European Commission has been leading the drive to create common standards in areas such as the member state responsible for determining the asylum claim, definition of those seeking asylum and protection, the

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7 In 2003, the European Commission stated that the protection system was 'in crisis' which posed "a real threat to the institution of asylum and more generally for Europe's humanitarian tradition...". However, the Commission went on to confirm its commitment to international law and standards on asylum, see EU Commission, Towards a more accessible, equitable and managed asylum systems COM (2003) 315, final, p. 11 and pp. 19-22.
procedures to carry out assessment of asylum and protection claims\textsuperscript{11} and common standards for reception across the majority of member states.\textsuperscript{12} As well as the treaties providing a legal base for EU action, the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights (EUCFR) also recognises the rights of asylum seekers specifically. For asylum seekers, article 18 EUCFR and article 19 EUCFR are of fundamental importance. These articles recognise the right to request asylum protection, along with the protection from refoulement.\textsuperscript{13} Asylum seekers also enjoy many of the other rights recognised under the EUCFR.

\textbf{B. FOCUS: RECEPTION CONDITIONS FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS}

In exploring the approach of institutions to measures adopted under the CEAS, this section will focus on the directives relating to reception conditions for asylum seekers. While still developing, international law does recognise that States have duties under international and European human rights law to protect the social, economic and cultural rights of asylum seekers.\textsuperscript{14} The approach of various institutional actors at the European Union level is the focus of this section. The


\textsuperscript{13} Article 18 and article 19EUCFR.

Reception Conditions Directive (RCD)\(^{15}\) and the successor Recast Reception Directive (RRD)\(^{16}\) are unique, in that a very basic standard of living has been set down from those considered outside the European polity. It has been estimated that the total cost across 25 member states (excluding Ireland and Denmark) for providing reception conditions to asylum seekers (and in some cases those seeking subsidiary protection as well as third country non asylum applicants) is €1.5 billion.\(^{17}\)

Some of the obligations under the Reception Directives include:

- Recognition of a dignified standard of living;\(^{18}\)
- Highly circumscribed freedom of movement rights;\(^{19}\)
- The right to be provided with some form of shelter;\(^{20}\)
- Material reception conditions;\(^{21}\)
- A circumscribed right to education for children under 18;\(^{22}\)
- Protection of particularly vulnerable asylum seekers;\(^{23}\)
- A limited right to work.\(^{24}\)


\(^{18}\) Preamble recital 7 RCD and Premable recital 9 and 10 RRD.

\(^{19}\) Article 7 RCD/Article 7 RRD.

\(^{20}\) Article 14 RCD/ Article 18 RRD.

\(^{21}\) Article 13 RCD/Article 17 & 18 RRD.

\(^{22}\) Article 10 RCD/Article 14 RRD. In relation to the possibility of separate education for children of asylees (or possibly asylum seekers themselves), Chalmers comments that educational provision “is only on terms of 1950s Mississippi”, Chalmers, D. (editorial) “Constitutional treaties and human dignity” (2003) 28(2) European Law Review 147.

\(^{23}\) See Article 16-19 RCD and Article 21-25 RRD.

\(^{24}\) Under the RCD, a right to work was granted (Article 11(2) RCD) if an asylum applicant’s first instance decision was not rendered within one year. This is to be reduced to 9 months under Article 15 RRD. Priority can still be given to EU citizens, EEA nationals and ‘legally resident’ third country nationals.
The socio-economic rights highlighted above, should not be seen as a wholly rights based approach towards the socio-economic rights of asylum seekers or without practical problems of implementation. In the drafting of the Recast Reception Directive (as with the Reception Conditions Directive (2003) previously), there was institutional push back to adopting a more rights orientated system of reception for asylum seekers. As is evidenced from the progression of the proposals from 2008 to 2011, concerns about abuse of the asylum and protection system led to significant downgrading of core elements of socio-economic rights protection within the RRD. In this regard, the European Parliament and Council of the European Union, were central in arguing for a less rights orientated and more punitive approach to material reception conditions for asylum seekers. The European Parliament, as co-legislator along with the Council of the European Union, adopted a legislative resolution under

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29 See above.
the first reading of the co-decision procedure in May 2009.\textsuperscript{30} (The ‘co-decision’ procedure is now known as the ‘ordinary legislative procedure’).\textsuperscript{31} The Parliament modified the Commission’s proposal in a number of respects, including \textit{inter alia} some attempt to strengthen guarantees for detained asylum seekers while permitting states to detain those claiming asylum and/or protection for reasons of public policy,\textsuperscript{32} insisting that legal assistance be granted to those seeking asylum or protection free of charge, regardless of whether costs can be covered from their own resources,\textsuperscript{33} and for the schooling of minors to take place once the application for international protection had been made.\textsuperscript{34} Parliament considered that removing draft Article 13(5) RRD, which stated that material reception conditions in kind, through financial allowances or vouchers, would be a “significant pull factor, which would be likely to cause additional illegal immigration”.\textsuperscript{35} Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) also deleted the method proposed by the Commission, which sought to calculate the level of material reception conditions with reference to social assistance available to nationals of the host state.\textsuperscript{36} The Commission accepted many of the amendments proposed by Parliament. The UNHCR and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) welcomed the lessening of discretion and the linking of reception conditions with social benefits of nationals within member states.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{note2} Article 294, Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) [2008] O.J. C115/77
\bibitem{note3} Amendments 12, 13, 14, 15, [2010] O.J. C-212E/348 (05 August 2010).
\bibitem{note4} Amendment 16 [2010] O.J. C-212E/348 (05 August 2010).
\bibitem{note5} Amendment 22 [2010] O.J. C-212E/348 (05 August 2010).
\bibitem{note7} \textit{Ibid.} Amendment 1, Recital 11; Amendment 23 and Amendment 24 [2010] O.J. C-212E/348 (05 August 2010).
\end{thebibliography}
However, the Commission, aware that Parliamentary approval will be needed to adopt the RRD, removed this provision.

However, as has been documented by human rights organisations, and as seen in a number of cases coming before European courts, the minimum requirements as regards the Reception Conditions Directive are not being upheld in a number of EU member states. The approach of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) towards substantive socio-economic rights of asylum seekers, shows the court willing to conform its findings and jurisprudence to that of the European Court of Human Rights i.e. willing to prevent removal to another EU member state who will not meet the minimum standards as set down in the RCD. The recent decision of the Court of Justice of the European Union in Saciri as regards the level of financial allowances for asylum seekers adds a further dimension to issues of coherencies and incoherencies. The CJEU make a number of interesting comments as regards reception conditions for asylum seekers. Human dignity is equated with the RCD (para 35); however at para. 40, it is made clear that

38 For an non-exhaustive list of current concerns relating to (amongst other things) the socio-economic rights of asylum seekers in European Union (EU) member states, see: United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR Observations on the Current Situation of Asylum in Bulgaria (UNHCR, 3 January 2014); ECRE, Asylum Information Database: Country Report for Italy, (ECRE, May 2013), however the European Court of Human Rights has found that the transfer of asylum seekers to Italy, does not constitute inhuman and degrading treatment, see Application no. 27725/10, Mohammed Hussein et al. v the Netherlands and Italy, unreported judgment of the ECtHR, 03 April 2013. The treatment of asylum seekers in Greece is discussed below, but more generally see, Amnesty International, The End of the Road for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants (December 2012).


40 Case C-79/13, Federaal agentschap voor de opvang van asielzoekers v Selver Saciri and others, decision of the CJEU, 27 February 2014.
“financial aid granted must be sufficient to ensure a standard of living adequate for the health of applicants and capable of ensuring their subsistence.”

C. ANALYSING THE EU INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE ON RECEPTION CONDITIONS

International and European human rights law have attempted (albeit, in my view unsuccessfully) to protect the socio-economic rights of asylum seekers in Europe. The key method and efforts for seeking protection of the dignity, inherent worth and socio-economic rights for asylum seekers should be focused on domestic rights regime, with international rights mechanisms supplementing socio-economic rights protection for asylum seekers. However, this also carries risks. Bigo argues that the approach of EU institutions (supported by member states) reinforces the view of immigration as a threat, and those the perception of those who seeking asylum or protection as being fraudulent. The effect of differentiating between the needs of asylum seekers and of European citizens creates an overarching EU institutional discourse of fear and mistrust of those outside the European polity. This feeds into national concerns on asylum and legitimises the controlling nature of reception conditions within individual member states. The large degree of discretion that exists in relation to the socio-economic rights of asylum seekers suggests human rights law and standards of dignity and respect for the individual, which some institutions of the European Union seek to embrace, is lacking when one speaks of the rights of the outsider. The punitive elements of the CEAS are further compounded with the placement of issues of asylum alongside other actual threats to the EU such as

42 Ibid., p. 37.
terrorism, drug trafficking, people trafficking and international criminal enterprise. In relation to asylum matters, Harvey surmises the position currently taken by EU Member States wherein the:

“…humanitarian institution of asylum is now discussed as a threat and/or a security problem.”

Along with this, Hepple argues that the

“…rhetoric of ‘Fortress Europe’…undermines the civil and social rights which belong to all human beings.”

The desire to strictly control who enters Europe has led to the securitization of the issue of asylum and limitations on protections of social and economic rights for asylum seekers. Tsoukala has opined that the problematisation of immigration is fermented by arguments arising from socio-economic degradation of the host society due to immigration, the need for extra security due to ‘problem’ communities and these two factors threatening a constructed and imagined ‘European’ identity.

Within EU law, the language of ‘reception’ of asylum seekers masks the reality of asylum seeker exclusion from human rights protections. The limitations on freedom of movement, right to work, the ability to suspend entitlement to material reception conditions and the denial of education to children on par with nationals trump the

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ideals of tolerance, equality, non-discrimination and dignity, which the EU supposedly holds as core values.

Liam Thornton

10 July 2014